

# The South's most Beautiful Homes and Gardens

One of the great attractions of the American South is its wealth of beautiful 18th- and 19th-century plantation and town houses, many of them surrounded by lovely gardens and open to the public year-round or, at least, on annual seasonal 'pilgrimages'

BY MARY MOORE MASON



## **NORTH TO SOUTH, THEIR LOCATIONS RANGE**

from Virginia – particularly known for its US presidential homes, gardens and annual, April Historic Garden Week – to Alabama, where Mobile, set beside the Gulf of Mexico, is renowned for its 35-mile-long Azalea Trail. East to west they encompass Atlantic coastal Georgia and South Carolina, the Appalachian, Great Smoky and Ozark mountains of North Carolina, West Virginia and Arkansas and, on beyond – through the lush, bluegrass horse country of Kentucky and music-rich Tennessee – the Mississippi River-fronting towns and plantations of Mississippi and Louisiana.

In Virginia, home of England's first permanent settlement, Jamestown, founded in 1607, many of the 18th-century homes were funded by the colony's first major cash crop, tobacco. Among them are the plantations sited between the James River and the parallel road stretching from the charming, restored, colonial capital, Williamsburg, which has many delightful cottage gardens, and Richmond, Virginia's

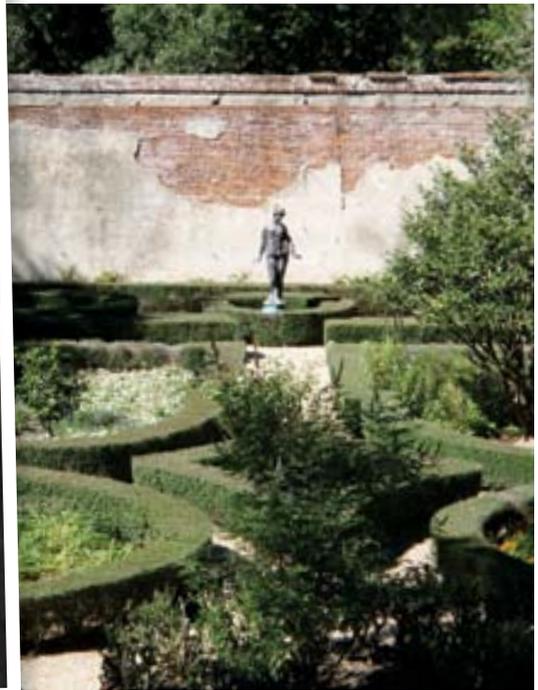
gracious, present-day capital city. Among them are Sherwood Forest, home of 10th US president John Tyler; Berkeley, birthplace of ninth US president William Henry Harrison and ancestral home of 23rd president Benjamin Harrison; and Shirley, dating from 1613 and inhabited by descendants of the same family since 1738.

Richmond is known for its 40-acre Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens and the Japanese and Italian gardens and opulent Victorian-era mansion of Maymont Park, as well as for 15th-century Agecroft Hall, which was transported in crates from Lancashire,

BELOW North Carolina's 252-room Biltmore Estate is the largest privately-owned home in America

IN VIRGINIA, KNOWN AS THE '*Mother of Presidents*', YOU CAN VISIT GEORGE WASHINGTON'S MOUNT VERNON AND THOMAS JEFFERSON'S MONTICELLO





England, and surrounded by gardens.

But two of the best-known of all the homes in the state known as 'The Mother of Presidents' are first-president George Washington's Mount Vernon, set on a bluff overlooking the Potomac River south-east of Washington, DC, and third-president Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, which crowns a Blue Ridge mountaintop near Charlottesville, two hours' drive west of Richmond. Both reflect the personalities of their original owners and are enhanced by a wealth of plantation outbuildings and picturesque gardens; the former focuses on 18th-century vegetation and the latter includes a centre for historic North American plants. Monticello also provides some insight into the role slavery played in the plantation owners' lives, as do an increasing number of the South's historic homes and plantations.

Most of these properties are open year-round, but hundreds of other, privately-owned properties invite visitors in only during the annual Historic Gardens Week (April 20-27 this year).

### ON TO WEST VIRGINIA, NORTH CAROLINA AND TENNESSEE

Some of West Virginia's most appealing gardens are situated in its former capital city, Wheeling, located in the state's north-western 'panhandle', where you will find the Bissonnette Gardens and an 1846 manor house in the grounds of the 1,700-acre Oglesbay Resort. If you visit during 2013, you may witness some of the celebrations marking West Virginia's 150th anniversary as the only state formed out of the American Civil War.

To explore America's largest private house, you should head south along the scenic, mountaintop Blue Ridge Parkway to Asheville, North Carolina, where you will find the Biltmore Estate. Built in 1895 for millionaire George Vanderbilt, the 252-room chateau is surrounded by 8,000 acres of parkland, including formal and informal gardens. They were



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Rose-down was built by a Louisiana cotton planter; Eve's Garden at Atlanta's Swan House mansion; Savannah's Azalea Inn and Gardens displays 19th-century indigenous plants; a whimsical flowerpot man at Agecroft Hall, Richmond, Virginia

designed by renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, best known for creating Manhattan's Central Park.

Tennessee is best known for the vibrant music scene in Nashville and Memphis, but also has its own share of special gardens. Among the Nashville options are the plantings of English boxwood, crepe myrtle, roses, lilacs and magnolias surrounding the Hermitage, the elegant, 1834 brick home of seventh US president Andrew Jackson, and the 55-acre Cheekwood Botanical Gardens surrounding the country home, now an art museum, of a wealthy, local coffee magnate.

The Memphis Botanical Gardens, on the other hand, display 2,000 species and varieties of flowers, including dahlias, roses and wildflowers. In neighbouring Kentucky, Lexington is most famous for its equine museums, events and stud farms but also boasts Ashland, the estate of prominent, early-19th-century US Senator Henry Clay where you will find 40 varieties of trees plus boxwood hedges, roses and peonies. And, in Arkansas, the spa city of Hot Springs, part of a national park, is home to the Garvan Woodland Gardens, which features hundreds of rare shrubs and trees, a Japanese garden and 100 different kinds of azaleas.

### SOUTH CAROLINA'S UNIQUE PLANTATIONS

South Carolina's most-famous collection of beautiful town and plantation homes is found in and around romantic Charleston, particularly along Ashley River Road to the west where Middleton Plantation – heralded as America's oldest landscaped garden – is enhanced by a butterfly-shaped lake, camellias, azaleas, magnolias, crepe myrtles and roses.

Nearby Magnolia Plantation – founded in 1676 and the oldest public garden in America – is also known for its camellias, roses, azaleas, iris, jasmine and various flowering trees, as well as for its swamp garden and a programme that interprets life in the

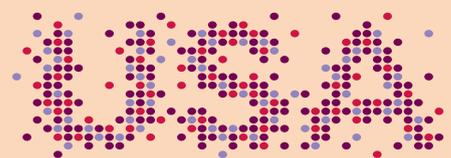




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slave cabins still on the site. And although not known for gardens, Drayton Hall (1738) is well worth a visit, as it is the oldest surviving example of Georgian Palladian architecture in the USA.

To its east near Mount Pleasant, Boone Hall, one of America's oldest working plantations, is renowned for its long avenue of huge, 250-year-old, Spanish moss-festooned oak trees as well as its collection of slave cabins. And, to the north, the road to the popular seaside resort of Myrtle Beach passes such attractions as Georgetown's Hopsewee Plantation, where rice was once harvested, and Brookgreen Gardens, visited for its attractive combination of trees, flowering plants and sculptures.

Georgia's equivalent to Charleston is mellow, old coastal Savannah, build around a series of fountain- and flower-adorned squares and known for its elegant town houses. Among them are Davenport House, now a museum, featuring a garden designed by English landscape gardener Penelope Hobhouse, the Owens-Thomas House, and, for those who wish to overnight, the Azalea Inn & Gardens, which displays 19th-century indigenous plants. The Savannah Tour of Homes & Gardens will be celebrating its 78th year on March 21-24 and there's also a tour of Hidden Gardens on April 19-20.

In big, booming Atlanta, there are two obvious sites to head for. The Atlanta History Center, featuring Civil War and African-American history and southern folk art, is sited in Swan House, a 1928 mansion built for a cotton-broker and surrounded by 32 acres of gardens, fountains and a 1840s farmstead. And, the 30-acre Atlanta Botanical Gardens offer such attractions as a canopy walk through the trees 30 feet above ground and a 10,000sq-ft orchid centre.

**VISITING GEORGIA'S GONE WITH THE WIND COUNTRY**

If you are a *Gone with the Wind* fan, head for Jonesboro, 15 miles south of Atlanta, where you

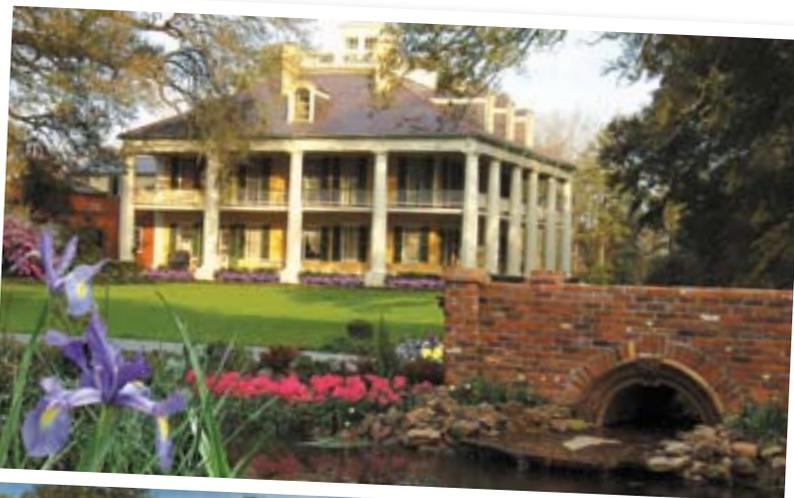


CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE A cottage garden in Williamsburg, Virginia; Louisiana's Houmas House can be reached by riverboats cruising down the Mississippi; Bellingrath, near Mobile, Alabama, is known for its beautiful azalea gardens

can visit The Road to Tara Museum, filled with memorabilia of the book and the film, and Stately Oaks Plantation, built in 1839 and featuring guides in Civil War-era costumes, furnishings of the time and period outbuildings that range from a school to a blacksmith's shop.

Also easily reachable from Atlanta are Pine Mountains' 13,000-acre Callaway Gardens, site of the world's largest azalea displays and one of North America's largest butterfly conservatories; Warm Springs, home of US president Franklin Delano Roosevelt's cosy Little White House retreat; and Plains, the hometown of another former president, Jimmy Carter. Also close by and popular with Civil War-era buffs, the 100-mile-long Antebellum Trail links up the university town of Athens – home of the State Botanical Garden of Georgia – with Macon, which hosts an annual cherry blossom festival (March 15, 2013). Along the way there are delightful towns, crammed with handsome antebellum homes and other attractions.

The Alabama destination to head for is the historic Gulf of Mexico port town of Mobile, site of the annual, late-March/early-April Azalea Trail driving tour past area homes and gardens. To Mobile's south in Theodore, Bellingrath – built in the early 1900s by a Coca-Cola magnate and known for its variety of azaleas and camellias – stages events throughout the year in its 65-acre grounds. Among them are a March 21-24 Festival of Flowers, an



April 13-21 salute to its 75 varieties of roses and, on November 1-24, America's largest outdoor display of chrysanthemums. Other Alabama charmers include Mobile's Oakleigh, completed in 1833 and Mobile's official period-house museum.

Charming old New Orleans is praised not only for the vibrant music scene, mouth-watering cuisine and romantic architecture of its French Quarter but also for the opulent homes and landscapes of its Garden District, linked to the *Vieux Carre* by the St Charles Streetcar. Visit eight-acre Longue Vue Gardens, anchored by a 45-room house and known for its 25 fountains, and then head out of town for the low-lying Cajun country to the west or along the Great River Road paralleling the Mississippi River to its north-west.

In the former region, a winner is New Iberia's Steamboat Gothic-style Rip Van Winkle house, built in 1870 by acclaimed actor Joseph Jefferson (who performed the role of Washington Irving's character Van Winkle more than 4,500 times!). Set on an island in a lake, it is surrounded by 25 acres of semi-tropical gardens where treasure chests, believed to have been buried by pirate Jean Lafitte, have been found. (Its café reputedly serves



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Stanton Hall in Natchez, Mississippi; the ornate parlor in Alabama's Bellingrath mansion; Louisiana's Steamboat Gothic-style Rip Van Winkle House

delicious Cajun cuisine). In the latter area, choices include white-columned Houmas House, about 45 minutes north-west of New Orleans. The setting for several films and TV programmes – notably *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* starring Bette Davis and Olivia De Havilland – it is regularly visited by paddlewheel riverboats, has a restaurant and is opening a bed-and-breakfast early this year. On up the river, opulent Nottoway, the largest plantation home in the south, also has gardens, a restaurant and overnight accommodation, and in nearby, idyllic St Francisville, Rosedown, built in 1835 by a wealthy cotton planter, has grounds originally inspired by the post-Renaissance gardens of France, Italy and England. In all, there are about 25 plantation and historic homes to choose from in the area between New Orleans and the state capital, Baton Rouge, and on beyond.

However, of all the river towns, the one most identified with opulent town houses is the former cotton port of Natchez, Mississippi. In its pre-Civil War heyday home to more than half the millionaires

## *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* STARRING BETTE DAVIS AND OLIVIA DE HAVILLAND WAS FILMED AT HOUMAS HOUSE

in the United States, it stages renowned spring and autumn pilgrimages (March 9-April 9; September 27-October 14) led by costumed guides to nearly 30 of its antebellum homes, most of them private and including Stanton Hall, Rosalie and Gloucester (where gardens add to its allure), as well as exotic Longwood, the largest remaining octagonal house in America. To the north, Vicksburg's somberly-impressive National Military Park is a reminder of the five-year American Civil War, which inflicted a brutal, 47-day siege on this riverside town and brought to an end the slave-based lifestyle, that created the opulent mansions that are such a tourist draw today.

For further information on Atlanta, Nashville and New Orleans visit [www.rhythmsouth.com](http://www.rhythmsouth.com); for more information on all the southern states, visit [www.TravelSouthUSA.com](http://www.TravelSouthUSA.com)



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